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ABSTRACT

Besides assisting their members in collective bargaining efforts, U.S. labor unions perform a variety of functions including contract administration and arbitration, political action, legislative activity, union administration, research, education, and community involvement. Therefore, unions have an interest in providing the following types of training activities: apprenticeship training programs to prepare skilled workers for the workplace, labor education and labor studies to enable union officers and members to perform their administrative and professional functions, vocational education to help workers develop new skills or upgrade existing ones, and self-improvement education to enhance members' abilities in such areas as citizenship and cultural awareness. As of 1984, 70 percent of the labor education offered in the United States was provided by universities and 25 percent was provided by labor unions. To enable more workers to participate in labor education programs, the following strategies are suggested: increased dissemination of information concerning educational opportunities and available financial aid, provision of career and personal counseling to workers contemplating participation in labor education programs, development of more flexible work schedules, provision of incentives for participation in labor education, special focus on the needs of women and minorities, and increased availability of tuition prepayment plans. (MN)

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OVERVIEW

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ORGANIZED LABOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMS

The Trade Union as an American Institution

Despite their long and widespread existence in the United States (labor unions currently represent approximately 22 percent of the U.S. work force), unions are still the subject of misunderstanding. MacKenzie (1984) has discussed the conflicting perceptions of those who view labor unions as an essential means of protecting the interests of workers in the workplace and of those who feel that labor unions are in direct "competition with the business and industrial community for the loyalty of American Workers and in the selection and election of political candidates" (p. 3).

The function of the labor union is not, however, limited to assisting its members in collective bargaining efforts. MacKenzie (1984) enumerates the following areas of union functioning: contract administration and arbitration, strikes, political action, legislative activity, union administration, research activities, organization of the unorganized, education, and community activity.

The Need for Labor Education and Training

Most of the functions of labor unions fall into two basic areas—union administration and representation of member interests. It follows, therefore, that unions have an interest in providing the following types of training programs (MacKenzie 1984):

- Apprenticeship training to prepare skilled workers for the workplace
- Labor education and labor studies to enable union officers and members to perform their institutional and professional functions
- Vocational education to help workers develop new skills or upgrade existing ones
- Self-improvement education to enhance members' abilities in such areas as citizenship, basic skills, or cultural awareness

Of course, the amount and type of training provided by individual labor unions in each of these four areas will vary in relation to the union's specific priorities and financial resources. It is generally true, however, that unions devote most of their educational efforts to the first two areas.

Apprenticeship Training

Among the major types of training sponsored by unions, apprenticeship training is intended as a system to develop skilled workers through a combination of supervised on-the-job training and classroom instruction. Apprenticeship training has been in existence since the Elizabethan Age and has been regulated by the U.S. government since 1937. Terms of apprenticeship, class hour requirements, and age limitations vary with individual programs, with the average apprenticeship period lasting from 3 to 4 years and being supplemented by 144 hours of classroom training. Control of an apprenticeship program can be a joint effort of the employer and labor union or can be either the primary or sole responsibility of either party; as of 1984, 85 percent of the apprenticeship programs registered with the U.S. Department of Labor were sponsored solely by employers.

Traditionally, apprenticeship programs were used to train workers for employment in the skilled trades or in crafts occupations. However, recent technological advancement has led to the expansion of apprenticeship training into many occupational areas—particularly medical and computer technology—that were previously considered semi-skilled and for which on-the-job training, as opposed to formal apprenticeship training, had been deemed sufficient. The Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training of the U.S. Department of Labor works with management and labor to establish apprenticeship training programs as well as standards for their regulation.

Labor Education and Labor Studies

Labor education and labor studies programs are designed to help union officers and members perform their union-related functions. Although labor education has traditionally been considered a part of adult education, it is to be distinguished from adult education inasmuch as it attempts to reach workers and integrate them into education through labor unions. Among those topics commonly addressed in labor programs are the following: workers' institutions; the function of the labor union; workers' responsibilities as citizens of state, nation, and world; issues and problems of the workplace; and laws governing unions and the workplace.

In addition to nondegree labor education programs, credit and degree programs in labor studies have also existed in this country since 1967. Originally offered at the master's level, labor studies programs are designed primarily to train professionals for trade unions, for all levels of government, and for private industry. Labor studies programming focuses on the labor union from the perspective of the social sciences and deals with the scope of bargaining; the relationships between labor, economic, social, and political systems; labor history and the law; the psychology of leadership; and current and future problems facing labor and labor unions.

Because labor education attempts to reach union members through their unions, many universities have begun working with unions within their respective states to establish labor advisory boards designed to assist and advise labor unions and their labor centers. These boards may include representatives of unions, postsecondary educational institutions, or both.

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The Role of Postsecondary and Higher Education in Trade Union Education and Training Programs

According to MacKenzie (1984), 70 percent of the labor education offered in the United States is provided by universities and colleges, and 25 percent is provided by labor unions. Labor education programs can either be the sole venture of the primary provider or can be in the form of an effort cosponsored by the postsecondary education and union sectors.

Colleges and Universities

The development of university labor education programs may be considered an evolution of three distinct phases. In the first phase, which lasted until the post-World War II era, labor education was delivered as a form of adult and continuing education, with programs staffed by professional labor educators who used adult education methodologies. The second phase of university labor education was marked by the creation of industrial relations programs at major universities. Formal recognition of the existence of a body of interdisciplinary knowledge surrounding labor unions and their functions led to the third phase—the beginning of credit labor studies programs. Although a few of these fairly recently developed programs have suffered setbacks as a result of economic downturns and budget cutbacks, labor studies programming is generally expanding both in scope and number of individual programs in existence.

Community Colleges

The establishment of community colleges in the 1960s opened new educational opportunities for workers and especially for union members. Faced with faculty and resource restrictions as well as the realization that, in many areas, the demand for labor education was already being met by established university-based labor education programs, many community colleges turned their attention to the development of labor studies associate degree programs. For the most part, these degree programs emphasized introductory courses in labor relations, labor law, union and contract administration, union communications and the history of unions and their role in the community. Frequently, such programs reflected primary trade union interests and were geared toward the union and labor force mix of their locale. Early program difficulties such as the quality of available instruction and the lack of basic and supplementary instructional materials were eventually remedied as a result of union support of college budget increases and the growing awareness of community colleges on how to work with unions. Like their university-based counterparts, community college-sponsored labor education programs are undergoing continuous expansion.

Barriers to Participation in Labor Education and Training

Despite the development of these postsecondary programs, however, barriers to workers' participation in labor education and training still exist. Training trust and tuition aid plans are available to help workers desiring to participate in such programs to obtain the necessary financial assistance; however, only a relatively small percentage of workers avail themselves of these financial aid plans. Smith (1982) cites the following factors in an attempt to account for these low participation rates: lack of confidence concerning one's ability to succeed in an educational setting, lack of information pertaining to available benefits, lack of information about educational opportunities, lack of encouragement, and lack of flexible work schedules.

Strategies for Increasing Workers' Participation in Tuition Aid Plans for Union Members

Based on a survey of workers, unions, and management conducted by the National Institute for Work and Learning (NIWL) as well as on a number of case studies of successful union-sponsored efforts to increase workers' participation in labor education, MacKenzie (1984) suggests the following strategies for overcoming the barriers to participation in labor education.

- Increasing efforts to disseminate information about educational opportunities and available financial aid
- Providing career and personal counseling to workers contemplating participation in labor education programs
- Improving linkages between the work site and educational providers
- Expanding the notion of job-related courses and programs
- Increasing the availability of tuition prepayment plans
- Devising more flexible work schedules
- Providing incentives for workers to participate in tuition aid programs
- Devoting special attention to the needs of women and minorities

REFERENCES

This ERIC Digest is based on the following publication:

MacKenzie, J. R. *Organized Labor Education and Training Programs.* Information Series no. 286, $5.50. Columbus: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, The National Center for Research in Vocational Education, The Ohio State University, 1984. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 248 387).

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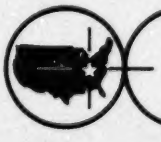

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